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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS

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SUBJECT: March 26 Elections in Rheinland-Pfalz/Baden-Wuerttemberg
-- Campaign Update

REF: A) 2005 Frankfurt 8530

Sensitive but unclassified; not for internet distribution.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: With four weeks until state elections in Rheinland-Pfalz and Baden-Wuerttemberg, polls show both state governments in the lead. In Rheinland-Pfalz, the SPD/FDP coalition (Social Democratic/Free Democratic) is banking on the popularity of long-time Minister-President Kurt Beck (SPD). In Baden-Wuerttemberg, the CDU/FDP (Christian Democrat/Free Democratic) government of new Minister-President Guenther Oettinger is still leading in the polls despite CDU in-fighting as well as the largest public-sector strike in fourteen years. The Left Party (WASG) remains under the five-percent threshold to gain parliamentary representation in both states; its entry into either parliament would complicate coalition-building. END SUMMARY.

Baden-Wuerttemberg: CDU/FDP Coalition
Leading Despite Strike, In-Fighting

12. (SBU) A recent poll (published February 10) gives the Baden-Wuerttemberg CDU/FDP government a solid lead:

CDU	49%
SPD	30%
FDP	8%
Greens	7%
Left/WASG	2%

Minister-President (M-P) Oettinger's personal popularity rating, in contrast, remains low at 43 percent -- versus 37 percent for SPD competitor Ute Vogt -- evidence of his continued struggle to gain the mantle of Minister-President since entering office in April 2005. The recent resignation of B-W Social Minister and longtime Oettinger confidante Andreas Renner (stemming from Renner's criticism of the Catholic Church over gay rights) highlights the ideological divide within the B-W CDU. While M-P Oettinger and his allies seek to make the CDU attractive for young and urban voters, conservative supporters of former M-P Teufel are trying to stall the "modernization" process. Critics see the state's recently introduced naturalization guidelines -- which purportedly ask many (largely Muslim) immigrants to reveal their ideological beliefs -- as a sop to conservative rural voters in the lead-up to the election. (NOTE: in a meeting with heads of consulates accredited to Baden-Wuerttemberg, State Secretary Rudolf Boehmler downplayed the affair and opined that

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the media had distorted an innocuous administrative guideline. END NOTE). While the mood within the state CDU remains sour -- and the public sector strike (Septel) is bad news for M-P

Oettinger -- the party continues to poll well in part based on the popularity of Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) nationally.

13. (SBU) The B-W SPD has failed to capitalize on the CDU's problems while M-P Oettinger's new day-care initiative has neutralized a key election issue for Social Democrats. With a grand coalition in Berlin, the state campaign is focusing more on personalities than national policies. At a party convention in Stuttgart on February 4, B-W SPD standard-bearer Ute Vogt attacked Oettinger for insensitivity on labor issues: "A Minister-President who calls (DaimlerChrysler) job cuts a 'fitness program' is not the right person for the job." National SPD chairman Matthias Platzeck also attacked Oettinger's leadership qualities: "The B-W CDU has sold its heart and people are turning their backs ... the trust is gone."

Rheinland-Pfalz: Ruling Coalition Still in the Lead

14. (SBU) Recent polls give Rheinland-Pfalz (R-P) M-P Beck a clear but narrow lead:

SPD	42%
CDU	36%
FDP	8%
Greens	6%
Left/WASG	4%

The R-P SPD is up three points since December 2005, while the CDU is struggling to hold its ground. Job satisfaction ratings also indicate the SPD's advantage: more than half of the electorate (56 percent) favors a continuation of the SPD/FDP government; only 34 percent express dissatisfaction. Beck remains popular, whereas CDU opponent Christoph Boehr has struggled (as in 2001) to gain public sympathy. During a farewell call by the Consul

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General, Beck said he was confident of victory as long as the election remained focused on state and not national issues. (COMMENT: Merkel's high approval rating and the CDU's relatively strong showing in Rheinland-Pfalz in September 2005 suggest that the CDU remains a serious contender despite Beck's popularity. END COMMENT.)

15. (SBU) The Rheinland-Pfalz FDP's stated desire to continue its coalition with the Social Democrats is a major stumbling block for the CDU. At its convention on February 4, the R-P FDP announced that it would remain in coalition with the SPD even if the CDU becomes the strongest party. R-P FDP Chief Rainer Bruederle justified the decision by stating, "after 15 years of outstanding governance, everything speaks for a continuation of this successful cooperation." At the same time, he rejected participation in a "traffic light" coalition (SPD, FDP, Greens). R-P Christian Democrats have profited little from Chancellor Merkel's popularity, reflecting in part Boehr's perceived inability to connect with voters.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) There are several wildcards that could spell trouble for state governments despite current polling figures. If the Left Party/WASG enters either state parliament, it will dilute seat totals for other parties, opening the possibility that only a grand coalition would have a stable majority. Federal Labor Minister Franz Muentefering's proposal to increase the retirement age to 67 is unpopular and could hurt SPD candidates (several SPD contacts lamented the announcement's timing). The political right is a factor in Baden-Wuerttemberg, where some fear that the new immigration questionnaire and the Mohammed caricature controversy could fuel anti-foreigner sentiments and motivate hard-line CDU supporters to vote for far-right parties (along the lines of the 1992 and 1996 state elections). END COMMENT.

17. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.

